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Peter the Great vs. Charles XII of Sweden in the Great Northern War

Loren Carrica

Charles XII, King of Sweden (1682-1718), had the unique ability of imposing his will on any given situation and the equally unique fortune of almost always coming out ahead in the game. He was an absolute monarch with that rare combination of courage and daring, a skilled tactician who excelled on the battlefield. All of Europe marveled at his victories, particularly Narva and his Polish exploits. Each of these remarkable successes was a kind of military education for the young king, but the relative ease with which he triumphed was deceptive in that this string of battles played into a false narrative that he was unbeatable. From the start of the Great Northern War (1700-21), Charles XII's principle adversary, Peter I of Russia believed this, yet Peter was circumspect. Even after successive defeats, he said, "The Swedes will go on beating us for a long time, but eventually they will teach us how to beat them."¹ Fortunately for Peter, as it turned out, Charles also thought himself unbeatable and the battle of Poltava (1709) would determine, once and for all, whose version of reality would triumph. By overestimating his own force and underestimating Peter the Great's oppositional force, Charles XII failed to realistically assess the potential risks and real dangers of his Russian invasion, and this proved to be the main cause of both Charles's momentous collapse and Peter's stunning, watershed victory.

The roots of Charles XII's false narrative were firmly established at the battle of Narva in 1700. Located on the eastern shores of the northern Baltic (Estonia), Narva was one of the first territorial acquisitions the Tsar wanted to cross off his list. Peter knew doing so would precipitate a response from the young and inexperienced Swedish king, but the city's strategic position figured prominently in his plans and he was willing to take the risk.² After all, the real prize was safeguarding Peter's land grab further to the north, where he was hoping to build his "window to the West," or newly planned port city of St. Petersburg.³ By besieging Narva, Peter made it clear he meant to stay and fight for his claims. Peter's main problem, though, was that in 1700 his army was little more than raw recruits: inexperienced and unprofessional.⁴

The Swedish army Charles led into battle was exactly the opposite, "tough and disciplined."⁵ Charles also had several key technological advantages such as the flintlock musket and the socket bayonet. Unlike earlier weapons, the socket bayonet "allowed a musket to be fired when attached."⁶ According to historian Eric Niderost, the Swedish regulars "shared the king's pious fatalism," and "Charles once said in effect that a man should not worry about being killed in battle; you would not die unless God decreed it was your time to die."⁷ Charles's battle plan was relatively simple. He wanted to concentrate his forces and hopefully achieve two separate breakthroughs in the thin Russian line.⁸ The Swedes managed this with remarkable success and the king "was in the thick of the fight, but more like a common soldier than a commander in chief."⁹ Niderost observes that, "fearless to the point of recklessness, he exposed himself

continuously to danger.”¹⁰ The blinding snow that had developed as the battle approached added to the Swedish blitz, and these surprising tactics turned a victory into a rout.¹¹ A Swedish officer commenting on the intense combat said that, “We slew all who came at us, and it was a terrible slaughter.”¹²

Narva established several key ideas that played into Charles’s false narrative. First, it suggested the Swedish army could overcome seemingly insurmountable odds. The odds at Narva were an astonishing 4 to 1 and while it was a bold and stunning victory, the true nature of Peter’s army must be taken into account.¹³ Second, Swedish contempt for the Russian fighting man, which had its start here, would continue to grow to dangerous heights throughout the long, arduous campaign.¹⁴ While this kept army morale high, it played into a disconnect that negatively impacted the Swedish command’s tactical decision making. In short, by continually underestimating Russian capabilities and strategic objectives, the Swedes would make crucial, game-changing mistakes at the most critical moments of the campaign. And third, the reckless abandon with which Charles threw himself into battle, while undoubtedly courageous, bold, and inspiring for the troops, fed into the growing myth that he was invincible.

The outcome of Charles’s Polish expeditions further contributed to the young King’s growing hubris and revealed more of his ambitious motivation. The Polish King and Russian ally, Augustus, contested Charles’s ambitions on the continent. Before Charles could turn east and settle his score with Peter, he needed to secure his flank and his supply and communication routes. Charles was shocked and angered by Augustus’s northern land grabs and vowed to defeat him. Of Augustus, Charles said it was “derogatory to myself and my honor to have the slightest dealings with a man who had acted in such a dishonorable and shameful way.”¹⁵ Charles began to methodically marginalize the Polish king’s political and military tactics, but it took years, not months. In the field, Charles defeated Augustus at Klissow (1702). Later, in 1706, when Charles invaded Saxony, Augustus’s home territory, a negotiated settlement was finally reached with the Treaty of Altranstadt.¹⁶ Charles then placed the pro-Swedish Stanislaus on the Polish throne.

Charles could then concentrate on the expansionist plans of Peter’s Russia. Charles’s confidence as king and warlord were clearly growing when he said, “The Tsar is not humiliated enough to accept the conditions of peace which I intend to prescribe.”¹⁷ Of continuing the war, Charles stated, “It will be needful first for me to march thither and depose him also.”¹⁸ on the goals of the campaign, the King commented that, “The power of Muscovy which has arisen so high thanks to the introduction of foreign military discipline must be broken and destroyed.”¹⁹ Finally, Charles betrayed just how far his ambitions had developed following Narva, when he suggested to the newly crowned Polish King Stanislaus, “I hope Prince Sobieski will always remain faithful to us. Does your majesty not think that he would make an excellent Tsar of Russia?”²⁰

Ironically, even the Swedish culture, heavily influenced by government propaganda, fueled Charles’s false narrative. An insightful study by historian Andreas Marklund uncovered new information regarding the typical Swedish soldier’s mindset. Marklund learned that “the primary task of a Lutheran husband was to guarantee the safety and well-being of his wife and

children.”²¹ Public propaganda like “the Swedish enlistment song- Daily Encouragement ode for God-fearing Soldiers and Faithful subjects During the Present Time of War and Harsh Deprivations...” encouraged a soldier’s toughness and resolve:

Their young husbands
had died like heroes in battle.
To gain peace and quiet,
all of them took a male heart.
It came to life in their breasts,
thus they went to fight the country’s enemy.
And since he had given them all a kiss,
they squeezed his blood out with bliss.²²

With core beliefs such as this, “The central authorities of Sweden in particular could represent the country’s military campaigns as a protective male defense of a female homefront.”²³ All that was left was for the soldier to go out and do the protecting, as decreed by the absolute monarch. How? Marklund states that links were made with “classical antiquity” and “to the war dead at Narva, where the fallen Swedes were compared to King Leonidas and his legendary 300 Spartans in the battle of Thermopylae.”²⁴

The tactical and strategic problems here are obvious. What happens when even the slightest hint of adversity presents itself before an “invincible” army? Will they hold up under this new strain and pressure? Few historians would argue the fact that, all things being equal, Charles’s Swedish regulars would have smashed virtually any configuration Peter could have mustered at the time. Seldom, however, is war truly equal and, more often than not, unpredictability is the order on the battlefield. So what happens when this do or die attitude, must endure extreme cold, hunger, soldier attrition, and the scorched earth tactics of a desperate and perpetually frustrated enemy?²⁵ The answer is plans must change and remain fluid, as successful commanders adapt to ever shifting battlefield conditions. It is a delicate balance and, of course, this is no easy task to accomplish. Moving backward or being flexible does not necessarily demonstrate weakness, if important and sometimes vital tactical or strategic objectives are achieved. Peter had recognized from day one that his young army needed to change, grow, and develop. He was open to change and encouraged to adapt because he had no other viable option. Charles, however, had never been defeated, and this only reinforced the myopic perspectives that accompany absolutism.

The Russian campaign progressed eastward with Charles’s creative maneuvering. Charles preferred to outflank his Russian opponents and gain forward positions, causing the Russian soldiers to retreat. This happened many times. However, this pattern changed at Golovchin, where there was a subtle yet noticeable shift that, for once, did not favor the Swedes. Here, Peter ordered his commanders to make a meaningful stand.²⁶ By giving up ground so readily, Peter was running out of the significant natural barriers, like the Berezina and Dnieper rivers, his vast lands afforded.²⁷ Peter’s commanders, however, overcompensated and, “after repeated experience of being outflanked, had spread themselves thin to prevent it happening again, [and]

Charles determined to use the overextension of his opponent's line to his own advantage."²⁸ Charles decided to attack the Russian center, but this time the Russians did not run away when pressed.

The firsthand accounts of Captain James Jefferyes, a British subject and diplomat who had joined the march east, offer an invaluable primary source on the day-to-day activities of the Swedish army. Jefferyes states at "about 5 [a.m.] the battle grew hot, so that in a whole hours [sic] time nothing was heard but a continual firing from the musketry on both sides."²⁹ After the battle, another Swedish victory, Jefferyes makes a telling and ominous observation: "The Muscovites have learnt their lesson much better, and have made great improvements in military affairs since the battle of Narva, and if their soldiers had showed but half the courage their officers did (which for the most part are foreigners) they had probably been too hard for us in the late action."³⁰ The math was also beginning to factor into the overall equation; Peter could replace his losses in men, which were many, while Charles could not.³¹

Upon reaching Tatarsk, Charles entered traditionally Russian lands and faced a momentous decision, one that could potentially make or break the campaign. Looking east, the Smolensk road lay unchallenged before him, and beyond that lay Moscow, but the King's problems were mounting. Historian R.M. Hatton observes four specific issues that weighed on Charles's decision making, starting with, "the army was short of food; Tsar Peter was putting the country between Tatarsk and Smolensk on fire using his Kalmucks and Cossacks to lay it waste; there were murmurings among the soldiers; and Lewenhaupt was not likely to join the main army with his supply train for several weeks."³² After many months of aggressive campaigning, the supply situation was now critical. A Swedish supply train commanded by General Adam Lewenhaupt had been slogging its way southeast from the Baltic but encountered numerous costly delays. According to Hatton, the supply train averaged a daily trek of "between eight and nine kilometers by present reckoning."³³

Peter was well aware of Charles's growing operational issues and anxiously awaited the King's crucial decision. One could argue common sense dictated the proper course of action, go back and link up with Lewenhaupt's army and supplies. It appeared to be a win-win proposition. If Charles made a tactical retreat, he could bolster his numbers and access the badly needed supplies, but Peter's scorched earth policy had forced Charles's hand. Jefferyes observed "We have been in a very desolate country since that time, half a mile from the borders of Muscovy, where we found nothing but what was burnt and destroyed, and of large villages little left but the bare names, we had also news of the like destruction as far as Smolensko."³⁴ Jefferyes also offered his opinion on what the king should do when he wrote, "He could have turned [north] towards the river Duna [Dvina], where he might have had provision enough, recruits for his army, a good opportunity of joining C:t Lewenhaupt, and a much nearer way of invading Russland."³⁵ So what does a headstrong, absolute monarch who cannot retreat decree? After much consultation with his advisors, Charles decided to march south, through the as-yet-untouched Severia territory, but curiously, farther away from Lewenhaupt's slow moving and increasingly vulnerable supply train.

Charles's decision to march south had immediate consequences. First, Peter pounced on this tactical oversight and immediately zeroed in on the Swedish supply train, rushing his soldiers to the slow moving Swedes by "mounting these infantryman on horseback and supplementing them with ten regiments of dragoons and cavalry, [thus creating] a new, highly mobile 'flying corps' of 11,625 men of which he took personal command."³⁷ On September 28, 1708, the two opposing forces engaged at Lesnaya, and according to Peter, "All day it was impossible to see where victory would lie."³⁸ The deciding factor turned out to be Peter's reinforcements, which ultimately bolstered the flagging Russian line and "although his lines were broken, Lewenhaupt ordered a retreat and the wagons burned."³⁹ For the Swedes, the battle of Lesnaya was a catastrophe; "the total loss was 6,307 men; of these, over 3,000 were taken prisoner," and "the loss of all supplies."⁴⁰ For the Russians, it was their army's first major victory in the field and "gave further evidence of the new fighting quality of the Russian army."⁴¹ Peter later considered that this pivotal engagement "was the mother of the Battle of Poltava."⁴²

Even with this enormous setback, Charles refused to retreat, and his march south slowly but steadily drained more men, supplies, and initiative. The harsh Russian winter further diminished Charles's army, which continued to engage in questionably relevant maneuvers across the countryside.⁴³ One hope was that Charles could enlist the support of the Ottomans who lay farther to the south, but this never occurred. Other cracks began to show as the campaign wore on into 1709. Charles's realistic assessment of his operational capabilities was beginning to falter. In a letter he sent to Stanislaus in the spring, the Swedish King noted "I and the army are in very good condition. The enemy has been beaten and put to flight in all engagements."⁴⁵ The head of the Swedish Chancery, Count Carl Piper, who had accompanied Charles throughout the campaign, as well as the army's officers, saw a much different situation. They all advised Charles that he "must withdraw from the Ukraine and retreat across the Dneiper in the direction of Poland, seeking reinforcement from the armies of Stanislaus and Krassow in Poland."⁴⁶ The King declined, observing, "that a withdrawal would look like a flight and only make Peter bolder."⁴⁷

Charles not only desired but desperately needed a decisive engagement with the main Russian army. On Charles's drive south, Peter's main army had shadowed the Swedish force but was unwilling to risk an all-out, decisive engagement. All this changed at Poltava, and it changed for one reason. On a routine reconnaissance patrol, at least routine for a king who continually exposed his body to real danger, Charles was shot through his left foot, while in the saddle, by a Russian sniper.⁴⁸ Ironically, the day was Charles's birthday. Jefferyes even commented on the incident when he wrote, "We hope this accident will be a warning to His Majesty for the future, not to hazard his person on every little occasion, the rather because we have had some probability to fight with his enemy who approach us nearer, which H. Maj:tys sickness has in a great measure made us defer."⁴⁹ The Russians were becoming bolder. For Charles, however, any realistic hope of victory on the battlefield ended in that one incident, but the king simply could not accept this stark and sobering truth.⁵⁰ Despite peace overtures from the Russians, Charles decided to gamble and risk everything on the proven strength and skill of his army.

From a military standpoint, a Russian victory at the battle of Poltava was already a foregone conclusion. First, the head of the proverbial dragon had been effectively chopped off, thanks to opportunistic Russian marksmanship, and the Swedes were overwhelmed in short order on June 27, 1709. Second, Peter and his army had acquired the requisite skill and experience to close with the enemy, endure a tough fight, and emerge victorious. And third, Peter had modernized his army based on the western model and thus leveled the playing field dramatically. Charles was able to escape and eventually return to Sweden, but his army and kingship would never be the same. In the end, it was a numbers game. While Charles's tactical genius and stoic resolve might have seemed to equalize unfavorable odds in the past, no such advantage, real or imagined, existed at Poltava. Captain Jefferyes even offered his conclusions on the failed campaign when he wrote, "You see a victorious and numerous army destroyed in less than two years [sic] time, much because of the little regard they had for the enemy; but chiefly because the King would not hearken to any advice that was given him by his Counsellors, who I can assure you were for carrying on this war after another method."⁵¹ Charles's false narrative was exposed for what it was and Peter's version of reality had triumphed. Poltava was a watershed moment for both Peter and Russia. Peter could then concentrate on the continued opening of his "window to the West: St. Petersburg. Shortly after Poltava, Peter wrote, "With God's help the last foundation-stone of St. Petersburg has now been laid."⁵² And while the Great Northern War lingered on, until peace was established in 1721 with the Treaty of Nystad, Peter's continued modernization of the army and the Russian state helped to transform a backward nation into a formidable power on the European stage.

NOTES

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4. Ibid., 31.
5. Ibid., 33.
6. Ibid., 30.
7. Ibid., 30.
8. Ibid., 33.
9. Ibid., 35.
10. Ibid., 35.
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14. Niderost, 35.
15. Massie, 359.
16. Ibid., 361, 423.
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18. Ibid., 438.
19. Ibid., 438.
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21. Andreas Marklund, "The Manly Sacrifice: Martial Manliness and Patriotic Martyrdom in Nordic Propaganda during the Great Northern War," *Historical Abstract, Gender & History*, (April 2013), Vol. 25 Issue1, 155.
22. Ibid., 160-61.
23. Ibid., 156.
24. Ibid., 156.
25. Niderost, 33.
26. Massie, 458.
27. Ibid., 458.
28. Ibid., 459.
29. James Jefferyes, *Captain James Jefferyes's Letters from the Swedish Army: 1707-1709*, ed. Ragnhild Hatton (Stockholm: Kungl, 1954) 51.
30. Ibid., 53.
31. Massie, 461.
32. R.M. Hatton, *Charles XII of Sweden* (New York: Weybright & Talley, 1968), 268.
33. Ibid., 268.
34. Jefferyes, 62.

35. Ibid., 63
36. Hatton, 268-69.
37. Massie, 467.
38. Ibid., 468.
39. Ibid., 468-69.
40. Ibid., 469.
41. Ibid., 470.
42. Ibid., 470.
43. Ibid., 487.
44. Ibid., 496.
45. Ibid., 490.
46. Ibid., 491.
47. Ibid., 491.
48. Ibid., 502.
49. Jefferyes, 68.
50. Massie, 504-05.
51. Jefferyes, 78.
52. Peter Englund, *The Battle That Shook Europe* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2013), 209.

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